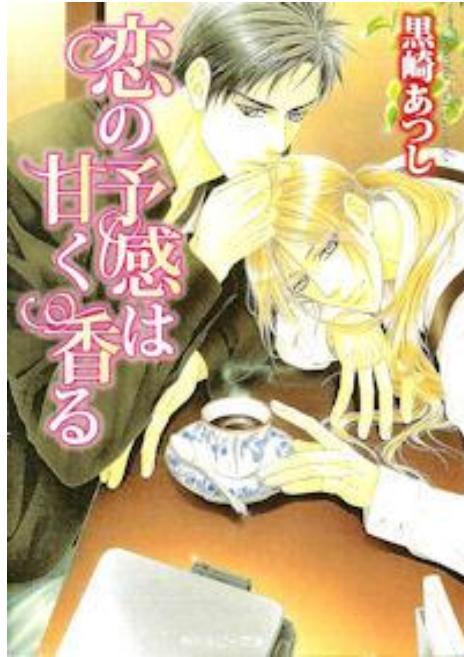


Koi no Yukan wa Amaku Kaoru

The Sweet Smell of a Love Premonition

By Kurosaki Atsushi



Chapter 1

"Sarasa" is the name of an old café famed for its delicious coffee.

The previous master was really interested in India and gave the café an oriental atmosphere. And the current master, Yanase Kaoru, makes sure to keep all of the souvenirs carefully clean.

The customers don't feel any discomfort with all of the antiques about and it simply adds to the impression of the café being old. Even the tables and chairs that are used are shined every day until they sparkle.

And yet...

(It's dirty...)

There is a little bit of dried mud on the chair leg Kaoru is staring at.

That's right, it rained two days ago.

That day, a customer came in with mud on his shoes. It probably rubbed off at that time.

(It's in a place I don't usually look so that's why I didn't notice. I have to be sure to clean it later...)

That was how Kaoru always thought, so it wasn't unusual for him... but he snaps himself back into reality.

Rather than falling into the trap of focusing on the mess on the chair's leg... there is a far more important problem.

Right now, Kaoru is currently trying to get up from the wooden flooring of Sarasa.

It's not like he fell on his own. A man by the name of Sakata who is a regular customer suddenly knocked him down while obviously drunk...

"...Um~ please, wait just a minute."

Sakata forcefully tries to kiss Kaoru while Kaoru uses both of his hands to try to push him away with all of his strength.

"Please stop being violent~! Being on a wooden floor is painful for my back."

Pushing against the other man was only making Kaoru's entire back hurt even more.

"Th-then should we move to a bed? I'm pretty sure there's a living space in the middle of this building, right?"

The man's earnest face staring at him from right above him is frightening. In order to try and deter him, Kaoru forces a false smile.

"Ummmm~ that's also a bit of a problem. ...Wouldn't it be troublesome if we were doing it there and other customers came in? After all, you wouldn't want to see something like this when you walk in either, right?"

"That's all right. I already put the closed sign up."

Sakata must have planned this in advance to trick other customers into not coming in. And he waited for all of the other regular customers to leave first as well.

(How terrible. This will damage business.)

Although, he can't help but think that there usually aren't many customers at this time of night anyway. But in that case...

"Ah~! In that case, how about you calm down and we talk first~?"

"We've already done all the talking we need to before now. I won't wait any longer. Please don't lead me on any longer."

He lead him on? Kaoru has obviously already refused him and can't let this go on any longer! But he's already putting all of his weight against him and nothing's happening.

"Wah! Hey! Do something about that! Please, hold out a while longer!"

He struggles violently, but pushing against a man who's a full size bigger than you are is hard.

(This is troublesome. I didn't think he was serious...)

The apron Kaoru wears really suits his slim waist, and so does the chestnut-hair that is tied at the back of his neck in a casual ponytail. He's beautiful.

He has constantly downcast, earth-colored almond-shaped eyes, and always wears a calm smile which adds to the romantic air around him. The number of customers increased as they came to admire Kaoru.

In the eyes of the customers Kaoru is a beautiful man, mature and graceful.

Because of that, as if like the constancy of the changing of the seasons every day the customers would compliment Kaoru on his beauty and casually ask if he would be willing to go on a date with them.

Because Kaoru doesn't care much about his looks, he would be shocked to hear that the men truly did think he is beautiful. But because it is troublesome to excessively reject them, he would elude them with vague responses.

When Sakata became a regular customer about half a year ago he also flooded him with compliments. But since it was a common occurrence, even when he became serious he was ignored with the usual vagueness.

Afterwards, he started to regret that he hadn't been more forceful.

Having said that, attacking someone in this way is definitely bad.

Kaoru grits his teeth as he is kissed deeply in rejection. He needs to think of something, and looks around the store.

And soon he spots a brass elephant close by on the floor which had fallen down.

Normally it would be decorating the counter, but it must have gotten knocked off during their struggle.

He reaches out his hand, and the tips of his fingers reach the elephant's leg.

Just a little bit more... Little by little he extends his hand and guides it towards himself. He's able to grab the trunk, but it's heavier than he had expected and his hand stops.

(If I hit him with this... it would probably really hurt.)

But even as he thought that, he also knew that it would be possible to drive the man off by hitting him.

But, if he did so he would hurt Sakata.

He doesn't want to be raped, but hurting another person would be even worse.

In that case, he needs to look around the store for something else.

(If I throw it over there, I might be able to manage something.)

What Kaoru is looking at is the simple colored-glass window pane in the door.

"Sarasa" looks out on a shopping distance down the street from the train station so even at night there's always people passing by.

If he throws the elephant through the window and shatters the glass someone who's walking by outside or a nearby shopkeeper could notice and come peek inside to see what's going on.

(But I wonder how much that frosted glass costs.)

It's definitely more expensive than ordinary glass. And it could have been custom-made which means that they might not be able to make another one just like it.

While he is worrying about how troublesome the expense would be, Sakata rolls up Kaoru's shirt causing goosebumps to erupt wherever his hand touches Kaoru's chest and stomach. Next his hand goes to open Kaoru's slacks.

It looks like there isn't any time left for thought.

(--I guess I don't have a choice in this situation.)

Having given up, Kaoru lifts the elephant and throws it at the door with all of his strength.

The elephant flies through the air with a whoosh and appears to hit at about exactly where he aimed for.

The frosted glass which had been a single piece, shatters into six pieces with a loud crashing noise as it's broken.

"Wh-what was that?!"

Sakata stops mid-motion, surprised by the sudden noise.

(Please, let someone notice...)

At the exact same time Kaoru is thinking that...

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?!! That's dangerous!!!"

The door is forced open with a 'Bang!' and a rough-looking young man in jeans barges in.

The angry-looking man is holding the elephant that Kaoru had thrown in one hand.

(I'm saved!)

On first glance, the newcomer definitely appears younger than the one who sent the object flying, and Kaoru feels relieved.

Rather than someone gentle-looking, the man in front of him is aggressive-looking with a frightening expression and short black hair.

He's glaring at them with pitch black eyes that hold an inner light. He definitely looks strong.

This guy will definitely be able to save him.

"Ah, I'm the one who threw that~! I'm sorry~!"

In order to win over the angry man so that he will save him, Kaoru smiles at him even though he's being shoved down.

When the man meets Kaoru's gaze he appears startled and quickly averts his eyes.

--Excuse me."

He suddenly turns around and acts as though he's about to exit the store.

"Eh?! Hey! Hey, wait! Won't you save me before you go~?!"

Kaoru yells out in a panic.

"...Aren't I interrupting you?"

With those words the man pauses at the door and turns just his head back with a suspicious look on his face.

"Not at all. In fact, you're a very welcome sight."

"Could it be that this situation isn't mutual?"

"No, not in the slightest."

As Kaoru nods his head, the man replies with an "All right leave it to me." He sets the elephant down where he is and rolls up his sleeves as he steps into the café.



He looks like he's having fun.

"Wh-what? This has nothing to do with you!"

Sakata loses his composure as he approaches the newcomer, trying to look courageous and triumphant. In doing so he's no longer above Kaoru and steps away from him.

"Sorry, but I simply can't allow a crime to take place right in front of me without doing anything, since I'm not a heartless human being. --So, what do you want me to do? I can tie this guy up and hold him until the police get here?"

The man approaches Kaoru until he's next to him and cheerfully asks his question.

Kaoru is flustered and shakes his head.

"Ah~ Well, he was a regular customer so getting the police involved seems a little excessive..."

As he stood up it felt like the pain in the back of his head got even worse.

It definitely hurt, but thankfully it didn't seem like it was bleeding.

"It seems like he just lost control, so kicking him out should be enough."

At that very moment Kaoru thought he heard the young man make a 'tch' sound with his tongue, but it was probably just his imagination.

"...I understand."

The young man nods obediently, and glares at Sakata with sharp menacing eyes while taking a single step toward him.

He makes as if he's going to violently shove him, and Sakata quickly backs away.

"Um~ excuse me, but..."

"What?!"

"If you threaten him from there, he won't be able to get out..."

The cafe isn't very big in the first place, and the idea of having more than one entrance is a joke.

There's only one door you can get in and out of. To the right of it is the counter, and to the left are five two-person tables.

Kaoru and the others are in the aisle between the tables and the young man is standing right in the middle which makes Sakata who is furthest from the door seem like a trapped rat.

He could climb over the tables and escape that way, but that would get the tables dirty and he might hurt himself which would be troublesome for Kaoru...

"...Then do you want me to get out?"

The man asks in bewilderment at Kaoru's words, raising his eyebrow.

"That would also be bad."

If the young man left now then they would end up right back where they started.

"That's why, um~ maybe if you came over here?"

Kaoru moves to stand over by the counter on the other side of the aisle to the door and motions for the young man to come over to where he is.

"And here I thought I'd finally be able to have a real fight after so long... Jeez! How boring."

Even though the young man is blunt and clicks his tongue in disgust he still does exactly what Kaoru asked him to do.

"Sakata-san~! Please feel free to leave any time."

As if to protect him, the young man stands in front of Kaoru to make sure that Sakata does as Kaoru said while Sakata lowers himself and nervously flees to the exit of the cafe.

"...Ah, um... I'll come again."

Sakata turns at the exit to the cafe, and Kaoru doesn't know what he's thinking.

"No, that's quite all right."

Kaoru refuses him in an instant.

Although for a moment Sakata looks like he's going to cry, he quickly runs away.

"A~ah... how disappointing. He was such a good customer too..."

Although it's bad to be attacked like that, to be honest losing even one regular customer is painful.

Kaoru spoke the words aloud without realizing it and the young man in front of him turns to face him.

"Was it wrong of me to save you?"

He seems a bit bewildered as he asks the question and Kaoru starts to panic, shaking his head.

"Not at all! You were a huge help. I never would have been able to run away on my own."

"Is that why you gazed at me so amorously?"

"Amorously?"

He didn't have any memory of using such a high-class technique.

Kaoru tilts his head to the side and the man makes a small frown.

"You smiled at me when I first came barging in here, right?"

"A~ah! That... I wasn't gazing amorously at you. It was just a courtesy smile."

"You smile at someone courteously in a situation like that?!"

"Yes. That's because when you first came flying in you looked really angry. For the time being I thought that it might win your favor or something..."

See, just like this. A common smile.

"...It doesn't look like just some courtesy smile to me."

"But, that's all it is. It wasn't anything as high class as an amorous smile."

"...You're not just pretending to be naïve, are you?"

"I'm not using any sort of fancy technique like that. All I can do is smile courteously."

"In that case you need to look at yourself carefully in the mirror when you smile like that. Then you'll be able to understand what I mean."

"Really?"

He usually looks at himself in the mirror, but it just isn't clicking for him.

Kaoru tilts his head to the side and the man frowns again.

"That's it! --This is the first time I've ever seen someone who could be so carefree and smile courteously at someone while they're being raped!"

"Is that so...? It must be the end of the world then."

"What is?"

Kaoru sighs, and the man's eyebrow twitches.

"Well, you must have seen lots of people getting raped to say that, right? I haven't, but... it must be an everyday occurrence in that case."

"There's no way in hell that would be!!!"

"Wah!"

At the man's outburst, Kaoru is shocked and unconsciously covers his ears.

"Don't yell so loud~ Don't you remember how loud your voice can get?"

"I do! I can control the volume of my voice! Unlike you!"

Recognizing that he's angry again, the man takes a deep breath in order to calm down.

"I'm sorry for getting angry. ...For now, could you just do something about those clothes?"

"Ah... I'm sorry."

The front of his shirt and slacks are still open from before.

Looking down at the front of himself, Kaoru fixes his clothes in a panic.

He isn't sure if it happened when he was pushed down or what, but it seems as though the buttons of his shirt were sent flying since there's not a single one left.

Kaoru picks up the apron he'd been wearing which had been torn off first from the floor and

starts searching around that area saying "Where are the buttons?" to himself.

"...Have you ever been told that you're a little... odd by other people?"

The young man spoke, having taken a seat at the counter.

"No, they haven't~ Although I have been told that I'm rather carefree. ...Ah, that's right. I'm being carefree again. This isn't the time to be searching for my buttons. --I haven't done anything to thank you yet, but would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I would appreciate it, but... shouldn't you do something about that first?"

The man is referring to the danger of the broken glass scattered about the walkway.

Kaoru is thinking the same thing, and puts the apron back on as he grabs the broom and dustpan and starts sweeping outside.

"...Ah~ there are lots of small pieces. It's hard to gather all of them up like this."

He crouches down and starts gathering up the tiny pieces in his hand. "That's impossible!" comes a determined announcement from right above his head.

"Ah, please wait inside. I'll finish soon and get some coffee for you."

"No, I'll help. That way you'll be able to finish sooner. --I'll collect the glass so you find something to cover this up with."

The man is referring to the door frame where the glass had been broken off of.

Kaoru is grateful and accepts the man's kindness.

After closing up the store, he closes the shutters and uses some cardboard to cover the gap in a way that wouldn't look unsightly.

Inside the store, the young man who had been using a tool to pick up the rest of the glass, stops so that they can talk.

"That guy earlier was a regular customer?"

"Yes. He was a wonderful customer who came every day, but..."

"So, did you give him the courtesy smile you gave me every single day too?"

"Well, this is a business... So I always smile at the customers like this."

He points to himself as he smiles and the man whispers 'I see now'.

"Even though you're a man, if you smile that way all the time it's to be expected that someone might misunderstand and get turned on by it."

"Is that true? ...I see~ I guess it was my fault."

His way of thinking hasn't changed, but Kaoru does recognize that sometimes he has a hard time understanding what other people are feeling.

Kaoru's feelings of being ordinary are striking. So if he had known that Sakata was seriously trying to approach him he would have used a different manner of dealing with him than what he did.

Then maybe Sakata wouldn't have reached the point that he had.

In other words, he might have been able to avoid losing a regular customer...

(A~ah, what a waste.)

Taking a moment to reflect, the man inhales sharply as if shocked.

"Listen, even if that may have been the cause for this one instance that doesn't mean that you were at fault. It's obvious that the person who resorts to violence is the one in the wrong."

"But, it was wrong of me to create the misunderstanding, right?"

"Normally there are plenty of other things you can do without resorting to violence. Like actually talking with that person. --Did he ever confess to you?"

"Never... I think. There were times when he would ask me out on a date, but he said it in a joking manner so I also treated it like a joke when I turned him down..."

He'd tell Kaoru that he was pretty today as well, and he'd respond by telling him to cut out the flattery. And when he told Kaoru that he liked people with straight hair down to their waist, Kaoru had responded by mentioning how girls lately had taken a liking to short hairstyles so it must be difficult for him.

Those times Sakata would just smile vaguely, and never confirmed or denied anything he said.

The young man, who had resumed cleaning while Kaoru spoke, confirms "Then you weren't at fault."

"Lately, there's been a lot of that. People who won't accept hearing any responses that don't go along with what they want to hear. Those types think that the other person is just tsundere and shy and think everything is good with their attempts at winning them over."

"What's 'tsundere'?"

"Viewing someone as tsundere means that while you are certain they love you, the 'dere' part, they're too embarrassed to show it and out of stubbornness they act 'tsun' or as though they don't like you."

"Heeee, that's certainly a high class technique. ...I think that's impossible for me."

If Kaoru were to fall in love he'd recklessly approach it head-on.

Because he is rather thick when it comes to the subtleties of human emotions, the results tend to be terrible...

"You should try to be less carefree. Those persistent types are annoying."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Like the way that guy earlier looked like he still has lingering affections for you, if you're not careful he could become a stalker. If he comes by again, don't use that courtesy smile with him."

"...Ye~s."

"You're an adult, don't stretch out your answer!"

"Yes!"

"And also, it might be best to ask the nearest police box to come and do periodic checks by here. --There, it's all clean!"

The young man nods as he looks around in satisfaction, then he heads to the entrance and picks up the elephant statue from earlier.

"Eh~ you're being excessive. It's not like I'm a woman, I'm a man."

"Being excessive is just as well. With that type of violence it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman. You were scared, weren't you?"

He could feel the heaviness of the man's hand as he handed over the elephant.

It felt like he was feeling the weight of the man's words, and he obediently nods his head while agreeing to his demands.

"I... suppose so."

It's true that he was very scared.

Although, while he was being attacked he had felt like he was in a dream and kept thinking that he needed to do something to get away and so he didn't feel any fear.

And after the terrifying part, the man had angrily stormed in and he realized that he then had someone he could rely on...

Carefree Kaoru suddenly begins feeling the fear long after it's over and starts trembling softly.

Before he realizes it, the hand holding the elephant starts to shake.

Shocked, the young man starts to pat Kaoru's arm as though he's trying to comfort him.

"You should close the store for tonight. Drink some alcohol or something and then go to bed."

"Yes. --Ah, but what about your coffee...?"

"You can make it for me some other time. I'll see you later."

Then, after telling him he should get the door fixed, the man makes a gallant exit.

--You're in love."

Comes an absent murmur from an old man named Roku-san who is sitting at one of the four chairs at the counter next to the entrance with an unlit cigar in his mouth.

'Sarasa' is a non-smoking establishment, plus Roku-san has been ordered to quit smoking by his doctor.

"So, your preference is for young men too."

In the chair next to the one Roku-san is sitting in sits an old man named Ryuu-san who is smirking at him.

On the counter above his lap is the elephant statue. Without even being asked to he has wiped it off and polished it until it sparkled.

"Jeez~ Please don't take this and that and turn it into a romantic affair~!"

These two old men are 'Sarasa's oldest regular customers.

They are usually the first ones to show up in the morning, and they always chat casually at the cafe until they finally head home.

Today as well, when he opened the shutters that morning at the usual time they immediately noticed that one of the colored glass panes on the door is missing and inquired about what had happened.

Since it couldn't be helped, he didn't bother trying to hide what had happened last night and told them everything, but their interest was now running wild in an unexpected direction.

"Don't be so shy. He seemed like the kind of guy you could rely on, right?"

"That's true, but..."

But he's a man, is something obvious that he's lost the will to point out to these two.

More importantly, these two know that Kaoru has recklessly pursued a romance with a man in the past.

(But, it's not like I'm gay in particular.)

Before he'd met that person, Kaoru had only been interested in girls.

He'd simply unexpectedly fallen in love at first sight with a man younger than him.

He really was normal in the past, but no matter how many times he explained it to these two they didn't comprehend it.

Normally, because they're starving for entertainment they tend to intentionally misunderstand things to make them more interesting and there have been times when they've ignored all attempts to persuade them otherwise. However, after so many years Kaoru has lost the strength to try and persuade them...

"Although, when I first laid eyes on him I thought he would be violent. But after talking with him he seems unexpectedly kind and dependable. He even helped out with the clean up... I'm really grateful that I met such a good person."

If he hadn't, who knows what would have happened...

As Kaoru imagined it, his body started to tremble.

"That's very high praise."

Roku-san murmurs.

"It's good timing. It was about time for you to find a new love anyway."

Ryuu-san says with a grin.

Although the two of them are teasing him, beneath their words is a lot of thought. Kaoru knows that they've been dating each other for a very long time.

"Although, I think falling in love with a man will bring me nothing but trouble."

"If it's you, you'll be fine."

"That's right! A beauty like you and a hard-worker... As long as they can attack your heart for a long time you'll do fine."

"Yes, yes. In the case I do fall in love with him, I'll make sure to let him attack my heart for a long time."

Although he isn't even sure if he'll ever meet that man again...

He wishes he'd thanked him properly, or found out his name or where he lived.

He's a little disappointed in how careless he can be.

"But still, that was a disaster for Mr. Elephant as well. I feel so bad for him, getting thrown like that..."

Ryuu-san grumbles as he polishes a scratch on the elephant's ornament.

Although it's an antique that doesn't have much monetary value, since Ryuu-san loves antiques so much it seems to really bother him.

"I'm very sorry."

"It isn't your fault. After all, I'm sure Mr. Elephant is happy he was able to help you."

"The one at fault was Sakata."

Roku-san murmurs softly.

"That's right. If he comes back here again we'll beat him up and kick him out for you."

To have these two frail old men want to be his knights in shining armor makes Kaoru happy.

"I'll leave it to you then."

As Kaoru affectionately smiles at them, the bell attached to the door chimes and the two old men

glance toward it out of the corner of their eyes as a conservative-looking customer enters the cafe.

"Hm? ...Never seen him before."

They had been planning on greeting the person if it was a regular customer that they knew. The two old men glance at the face of the man in the doorway, but quickly lose interest.

But Kaoru had leaped over the counter over the counter without thinking.

Since this man is the same one from last night.

(Huh? The atmosphere around him seems different from last night...)

Last night he was constantly using slang and talking about beating people up and was cloaked in a belligerent atmosphere, but today he is standing there calmly.

He's wearing a high-quality suit in subdued colors very neatly, but the same strong light in his eyes from last night is still there and is amplified by the intellectual-appearing glasses that he is wearing.

Kaoru never would have imagined that he could look like a proper salary man, overflowing with such calm self-confidence, when last night he would have guessed the man was a restless freeter.

T/N: A freeter is a young person in Japan who lives off of part-time work.

Although he still has a vitality about him that makes him seem unsuited for his profession.

"Welcome. --And thank you very much for last night."

Kaoru bows his head deeply and raises it again and the man responds with a wordless affirmation before turning his gaze to the door.

"Have you made arrangements to fix the door?"

"I called the glass shop first thing this morning, but it seems that they're currently working on some big project... They said they'd come fix it in about a week."

"You're willing to leave it in this unsightly condition for a full week? If they're in the neighborhood, why don't you ask them to come at night?"

"No, there's no way I could ask them to go that far..."

"The front door is the store's face. Going that far is to be expected for it. You really are carefree, aren't you? --All right! I'll call them for you so give me their phone number."

"No. ...Um~ you really don't have to do that."

Kaoru becomes flustered as he refuses him.

"Don't be so reserved. --If you called them first thing this morning, then I should be able to just hit redial..."

The man steps further into the store, and with his long arm he's able to reach across the counter and pick up the store phone's receiver.

"Eh? Ah! Wait..."

But Kaoru has no time to stop him as the man presses the button and on his own starts the conversation with "This is the cafe 'Sarasa'."

He talks for a while before returning the phone to its original spot looking satisfied.

"They said they'd come repair it tonight. They said it is a big favor so they're asking for an extra fee, but that shouldn't be a problem, right?"

Although the man says it triumphantly, Kaoru gloomily replies "It is a problem."

"Why? They said it would only be an extra charge of a thousand yen, that's all."

T/N: 1,000 yen is around 10USD

"That thousand yen is painful."

The truth is, when he'd called this morning he was told that if he waited a week he could get a discount and had been exceptionally pleased about that.

To have to pay an extra fee instead of getting a discount couldn't help but leave him disappointed.

"That's right, last night you were talking about how it was a wast too. --Is this store really that

unprofitable?"

"It's embarrassing, but..."

Just paying for the store's maintenance and the owner's salary was all he could do, it had gotten to the point where Kaoru barely collected any sort of salary.

So that he wouldn't have to pay rent for an apartment, Kaoru slept in the small space in the store, and he was letting his hair grow out so that he wouldn't need to use a barbershop. Even the few pairs of white shirts and black slacks that he owned which served as his uniform were able to serve multiple purposes.

Even the apron he always wore was something that he'd been given by the store that sells the wholesale coffee beans that he buys.

"In that case, how about charging these old guys for their reserved seats?"

"Eh?"

At the sudden idea suggestion, Kaoru could do nothing but stare blankly at the man, but the two old men appeared to get annoyed.

"What a rude youngster."

"That's right. Who are you calling 'old guys'? You should respect your elders!"

"If you want respect, then how about you guys cooperate with your favorite cafe?"

"We do!"

"Liar. Anyway, you're the ones taking your time leisurely drinking coffee here every day without change for ten years. If you don't like the idea of a charge for reserved seats, then how about you order more than a single cup of coffee in an hour!"

All of a sudden, the three of them were caught up in an argument.

"Jeez~ please don't say such unnecessary things."

Kaoru, in order to defend the two old men, steps in during a lull in the argument.

"Don't defend them. It's because you're so sweet to them that they're acting spoiled."

"They're not spoiled. It's for health reasons that they can't have more than one cup of coffee a day, so they're family asked me to make sure that I don't serve them more than that."

Although, it seems like it isn't the coffee that is the problem for their health but rather all of the milk and sugar they like to add to it.

That's why after serving their one cup of coffee, their family had asked that he put tea or black tea into any subsequent cups to have them drink that instead.

After listening to his story, the young man murmurs 'heehh' and looks at the two old men curiously.

"Even though it looks like your outward appearance hasn't changed, it seems like you've finally accepted your aging on the inside. --I'm sorry for saying too much."

"W-well, as long as you understand."

"That's right."

"Do you three know each other?"

Kaoru asks, and the young man murmurs 'yeah' while the two old men declare 'we don't know him' together.

"You old guys don't remember me? --Have you gone senile?"

The words the man says are like the strongest curse, and the two old men obviously become flustered.

"W-we're not senile! We just forgot a bit!"

Ryuu-san yells, while right next to him Roku-san silently knits his eyebrows together before solemnly pointing to the innermost table in the cafe with his unlit cigar.

"...That seat?"

"Yeah, that's right. How's the old man that sat over there? Do you remember me?"

Ryuu-san replies with an 'uh' in obvious confusion, but Roku-san stealthily whispers into his ear causing him to exclaim "Aah, that guy!" and nods his head in agreement.

"You're that author who failed."

"Author that failed...? I didn't fail! Right now I'm writing history."

"Liar."

"It's not a lie. Right now I'm a best-selling author. Haven't you ever heard the name 'Andou Seiji'?"

"Ah, I have!"

Kaoru's hand shoots up.

A regular customer who liked to read would lend him books and that name was one that appeared often.

'Andou Seiji' has had almost all of his books turned into movies or television dramas by the media, and everything that he's done become hits making him the ultimate best-selling author.

With Kaoru's explanation, this time the two old men look at Seiji with curiosity.

"So, you became an author."

"Yeah. And as a result I got so busy I didn't have time to come to this shop or anywhere near here anymore."

"So, unexpectedly you were a regular customer here?"

As Kaoru tilts his head, not really understanding the conversation, Ryuu-san explains "It was about a year before you started working part-time here."

"There used to be this really poor student who would sit at the innermost table in the cafe with a bunch of manuscript papers all day, every day. ...Which reminds me, that student would sit there and only drink one cup of coffee the entire time."

"That's right."

The two old men smirk while Seiji mutters "Sorry" with a sour look on his face.

"Anyway, now money isn't an issue anymore so I'll pay for multiple cups of coffee properly."

"Ah, no. Let me treat you today. As thanks for last night."

Kaoru returns to the counter and asks "What would you like?" to which Seiji answers "Mandelic" before sitting at the innermost seat at the counter.

"...Ah."

All three of the others freeze the moment they see that.

"What? Am I not supposed to sit in this seat?"

"No~ ...It's nothing like that~"

Kaoru shows him his courtesy smile.

It's just that, that was Kaoru's seat back when he worked part-time with the owner.

The counter at 'Sarasa' was too small to have both the owner and him standing behind it at the same time...

Of course, now that he's the one running the cafe his position is behind the counter.

But that seat had become rather nostalgic for Kaoru and he had ended up not wanting other people to sit in it.

That's why he tended to accumulate items, like the ornamental elephant, in front of that seat to ward off any customers from sitting there. But the elephant that performs that duty is currently sitting in Ryuu-san's lap.

(...This might be for the best.)

Before Kaoru came here to work part-time that seat had been for customers.

He needed to stop such strange obsessions, and open every precious seat to his customers.

(If I don't do that then the number of seats gets smaller...)

As he speaks inwardly to himself about this, he carefully makes the coffee.

He uses a cup he had heated up beforehand and siphons the coffee into it before handing it to Seiji with a "Here you are."

"The cups are the same as they used to be."

The Noritake bone china cup is nostalgic for Seiji as he gazes at it.

He inhales the fragrance and slowly brings the cup to his lips.

"Yeah. It's delicious. There's no way you'd lose to the owner."

At the words of praise Kaoru smiles naturally and says thank you.

"So, what time is the owner scheduled to come in?"

"--Eh?"

The other three immediately stop moving at Seiji's question.

"What? Did I say something strange?"

"Ah~ no. ...It's been a long time for you, hasn't it? Of course you wouldn't know."

"What do you mean?"

"The owner passed away."

"Passed away... --When?"

"It was, um..."

As Kaoru starts counting on his fingers, Roku-san rescues him by saying "Seven years."

"That long ago... Was he sick?"

"No, he got injured while traveling."

"You know that for a long time his dream was to travel to India, right? While he was there he got caught in an accident. If he had been in Japan he might have survived his injuries, but..."

Ryuu-san sniffles.

"I see. ...That's unfortunate."

When he was a student, Seiji received a lot of kindness here and hadn't done anything to give his thanks or repay him which cases him to feel pained.

It was the same way when the owner died.

When he passed countless people came to the shop to pay their respects.

For Kaoru, who at that time had just become the owner from being a mere part-timer, the number of people who appeared was very hard for him.

"So, now you're the owner?"

"Yes. Although I don't believe that I've been able to reach the level of the previous owner... at the very least, I'd be happy if you come again."

He lowers his head, and Seiji responds with a "Yeah" while looking happy for some reason.

"Well, it seems like you have some serious problems. So, just like last night, I'll be sure to keep coming around for the time being."

(Serious problems... huh?)

Perhaps there are some serious problems, but Kaoru still feels off-put by his arrogance since last night.

Still, after losing one regular customer last night he's extremely grateful to be getting another one so quickly.

That's why he lowers his head again and says "That's very reassuring" instead.

"Leave it to me. I'll be a way better customer than these old men. --So, what's your name?"

"It's Yanase."

"How about you give me your first name instead?"

"Aah, yes. It's Kaoru."

He asks him how to write it, and Kaoru draws the characters on the counter with his finger to show him.

"Why do you use two characters? It should be fine with just the first character."

"It's because I'm the youngest of five boys."

He'd heard that the second character in his name was considered a good character for parents to use with the child they planned on stopping with in families with lots of children.

Since the one who had given him his name was his grandfather, that was probably the meaning it had been given with.

Since they appear around the same age, Seiji seems to have heard a similar story and doesn't need any further explanation as he murmurs "I see" in understanding.

"My name is written with..."

"Ah, I know."

Kaoru remembers seeing it in the book the regular customer had lent to him, and shows Seiji the characters for 'Andou Seiji' with his finger, writing Seiji with the characters for 'blue' and 'mercy'.

"That's my pen name. It's actually spelled this way."

Seiji writes out 'Seiji' with his finger using the characters for 'holy' and 'plan'.

"So you pronounce them the same way, only the spelling is different?"

(Do they have different meanings?)

As Kaoru thinks he asks "Do you believe in divination?" to which Seiji responds with a blunt "Not really..."

"More importantly, call me by my name."

"Name? ...Um~... Is it all right if I call you Seiji-san?"

"Yeah. Good job."

Seiji looks very happy.

"Well, since starting today I'm going to be a regular customer be sure to give me your courtesy smile too."

"...Haa."

While he is speaking, Kaoru decides that for now it's best to just smile and nod his head in confirmation.

"Such arrogance."

"Attaching '-san' to the name of someone like that is really unnecessary, calling him 'Seij' would be plenty."

The two old men huddle together and announce their complaints with boos.

"Don't be so unreasonable~! There's no way I could refer to a customer with a nickname like that."

As Kaoru becomes troubled, Seiji speaks up with "I wouldn't mind if you gave me a nickname."

"...Eh?"

"That's right, that's right. You should give him a nickname and use him as your servant."

"Shut up, old man. Just be quiet for a while."

"What did you say?!"

"Excuse me, um~..."

"Arrogant brat!"

"Who are you calling a brat?!"

Kaoru tries to tell them to calm down, but unfortunately he didn't get involved in time and the three of them have already gotten into a verbal fight.

"Excuse me~ I would appreciate it if my customers didn't fight."

Even though just yesterday 'Sarasa' had a nice atmosphere with the smell of coffee and the sound of jazz filling it, how did it become like this...?

--Ah, welcome!"

The usual appearance of the regular customers who come in the afternoon suddenly turns shocked as they open the door.

"Excuse us. You seem busy..."

Kaoru quickly heads over to the usual table where they sit and apologizes to them as he wipes it down.

"But it's nice to be busy every now and then. Besides, the old men look like they're having fun."

The regular customers forgive him with wry smiles.

(...Huh? Does it really look like they're having fun?)

They're so angry that their blood vessels are standing out so it seems like they might have high blood pressure.

Although, he has to admit that it seems more stimulating than the old men's usual conversation about the good weather that day or how poor the condition of their health is...

(For now, I need to get them to quiet down...)

While Seiji initially had the upper hand, when the old men brought up stories about Seiji's destitute state back when he was a student the tables were turned.

As the two old men talk down to Seiji, he makes a mortified expression.

(It looks like he's going to lose. Those old men sure are giving it all they've got.)

Even though that guy had been so excited at the prospect of getting into a physical fight just last night...

Even if at first glance he comes across as rude, he still felt sorry for him.

His impression of Seiji is growing deeper.

(...Yeah. I guess this is all right every now and then.)

Since becoming the owner of 'Sarasa', Kaoru had tried his hardest to make sure the atmosphere didn't change since the previous owner had been here.

In order to not erase the memories of the owner, and to allow him to continue existing in this place...

The old men sympathized with Kaoru's feelings, and did their best to cooperate with him. Yet as soon as an old face showed up they completely forgot about that and lost themselves in having fun.

For some reason, Seiji's presence has caused a wind to blow through the cafe, which had been frozen in place for such a long time.

(Maybe it's the blowing of the seasonal winds?)

He wondered when this wind would blow Seiji far away from 'Sarasa' again this time.

Still, being busy like this is fun.

However, if there are disturbances like this all day every day from now on it would be bad for business.

For now, he needed to get the three worked-up people to calm down. Perhaps he should switch out their coffee for some calming tea...

This is the start of Kaoru's exciting new days.

Koi no Yukan wa Amaku Kaoru

The Sweet Smell of a Love Premonition

By Kurosaki Atsushi



Chapter 2

Tap, tap, tap...

Seiji drums his fingers regularly against the counter.

(It looks like he's seriously worried about something.)

It's been half a month since Seiji first appeared at 'Sarasa', and Kaoru has thoroughly memorized the way his brow wrinkles when he's seriously thinking about something.

Normally, he wouldn't remember such small details about someone. But even though Kaoru is aware of the fact that he's bad at reading other people's emotions, Seiji's emotions are so plain on his face that it's easy to tell what they are.

Recently, Seiji's reserved seat has become the innermost seat at the counter.

It was the place where the elephant statues used to sit, but now in that spot sits a small laptop computer which Seiji stares intently at the screen of every day.

According to him, he's in the middle of refining the plot for his newest book. But when Kaoru carries cups of coffee to the table next to him, he secretly glances at the screen and rarely sees the window for word processor open but rather will usually see a window for the internet on the screen.

It seems the fans of the author 'Andou Seiji' have been praying for a new work from him for a while now.

After the busy rush for lunch quiets down, Seiji becomes pretty much the only customer left in the cafe.

As Kaoru finishes wiping off the remaining moisture on the cup that he had just finished washing, he finds himself with nothing to do for the moment.

(I should drink something...)

Kaoru had recently received a new flavor of coffee to test out from the coffee bean seller that he is friends with. He called it the shop's special original blend.

"Seiji-san, I have a sample of a new coffee blend from a coffee bean seller I'm friends with. Would you like to try it with me?"

"Yeah. I'll have some."

Seiji's fingers stop tapping on the counter as he answers.

Kaoru grinds the coffee beans in a coffee mill and then filters it through a funnel into a siphon which he lights a fire under. When the water in the flask starts to boil he sets the filter on it and the bubbling water starts to rise up through the filter.

(Hmmm, it has a nice fragrance.)

Kaoru slowly mixes the coffee with the boiling water using a spatula and when they are blended together he extinguishes the fire.

If his timing was slightly off the flavor of the beans wouldn't come through, or if he waited too

long it would become bitter.

During the time the previous owner had been teaching him he made countless mistakes, but recently he has become able to tell the condition of the beans just by looking at them and moves his hands without even thinking about what he's doing.

There is no way he would have learned this by simply remembering what he had studied, this is the result of many years of experience.

After putting out the flame, he takes the filter and pours the coffee through it and into the flask.

He then pours it into a cup and offers it to Seiji with a "Here you go" which finally stops the noise of his fingers completely.

"Thank you."

After giving his honest gratitude, Seiji picks up the cup.

He confirms the fragrance, and then brings it up to his mouth to test it for himself. Kaoru also brings his own cup up to his mouth.

"Hm, I see. It's a pretty light roast. It's not really enough for me, but it's light and easy to drink so I'm sure the old men will enjoy drinking it."

"You're right. ...But I wish it had more of a presence."

If you were drinking it with a light meal there wouldn't be any problem with it, but if you try to enjoy it simply as coffee then he's sure there will be a lot of people who will feel like it just isn't strong enough.

At its foundation, 'Sarasa' is solely a coffee shop. The side menu has a number of other options and Kaoru is able to import some things like cheesecake and cookies from a nearby bakery, but they don't offer anything aside from those very commonplace items.

He feels that the demand for coffee with this light a roast is going to be very small.

"I like the unique taste, but I think it needs a bit more of a punch. I think I'll pass on this one, this time. Thanks for helping me."

"It was an easy order. --By the way, Kaoru, why is this cafe so unprofitable?"

When Seiji suddenly probes such a painful spot, Kaoru is shocked.

"Ummmm~... Could it be that the number of customers who come in are so few?"

Kaoru smiles courteously at Seiji and briefly waves his fingers in an attempt to deceive him, but Seiji retorts with "Liar" and a glare.

"There are plenty of customers who come in."

"Really?"

"Really. I've been counting the number of customers for a while, but I don't think that the number of customers has changed since the time of the previous owner. At that time he was even making enough extra to hire a part-timer, and yet now you're having a hard time coming up with the funds to replace a single pane of glass. Don't you think that's strange?"

Tap, tap... the sound of fingers drumming against the counter starts up again.

"For a while... Seiji-san, does this mean that you haven't been doing your work and have instead been seriously thinking about that?"

"It's not like that. Anyway, you're really too carefree. --I asked the old men, but they said you pretty much don't take any salary. In this situation, if even one bit of trouble comes along you'll immediately go bankrupt."

The word 'bankrupt' makes Kaoru's chest tighten up.

"I-it's really all right~! There's no way any sort of trouble that could cause me to go bankrupt would happen."

"What about what happened recently? It was all right because I happened to be passing by, but if I hadn't been there you seriously would have been raped, and then what? Would you have been able to go to work like normal the next day?"

"...That's..."

He wanted to answer strongly that he would have opened the cafe, but it probably would have been impossible.

That day, the delayed terror that had set in wouldn't go away, and the fact that he hadn't been able to stop his hands from shaking had certainly been a problem...

At that time, he'd regretted letting Seiji-san go home as he'd thought about how much better he probably would feel if that person had stayed by him at a time like that.

Seiji had been right when he'd said that that sort of violence affects you, whether you're a man or a woman.

If that hadn't been just an attempt at a crime, the situation would have been much worse. He probably would have carried that sort of fear around with him forever.

"Here are your food sales. It wouldn't be impossible for the store to shut down just because you developed a strong cough because of a cold, right? If you were to shut down for a week, you wouldn't be able to continue, would you?"

That's certainly true.

As he hits the bulls-eye, Kaoru loses any sort of retort.

"If you really care about this cafe then don't avert your eyes and look straight at reality. --Have your rates gotten more severe since you inherited it from the previous owner?"

"...No, nothing like that."

The previous owner of the building had been a wealthy man, and hadn't demanded profits from the shop.

T/N: Kaoru is referring to an owner before the owner we've been talking about, who also owns the building the cafe is in, from what I can tell.

The original owner of the building had only opened the shop to fulfill a dream of managing a coffee shop. And it seemed that around the time of the owner's death he'd been considering shutting down the shop.

Kaoru had wanted to continue to maintain this shop which the owner had loved and didn't want

to see this beloved place lost, so he'd managed to convince the original building owner to entrust the shop to him. This had also dealt with the problem of what to do with the shop for him.

After that, the building owner set up the condition that he would take the same amount of money in fees from him as he'd taken from the previous owner, and left all of the management of the cafe up to Kaoru.

Perhaps it is because remembering the previous owner is painful for him, but since Kaoru took over the cafe the building owner hasn't set a single foot inside of 'Sarasa'...

"Then what is taking all of the money?"

Seiji looks around the room and sees that it is still set up in the Oriental flavor that it had been when the previous owner, who had loved India so much, had set it up.

"From what I can see pretty much nothing has changed, but... that reminds me, that elephant was here back then too."

Seiji knits his eyebrows together with a "Hm" as he taps his finger in front of the elephant statue which has lately been moving all over the counter.

"Did the elephant get dirty?"

"No, that's not it..."

Seiji's finger, which had been touching the elephant, lands on a menu that Kaoru had carelessly left on the counter and he immediately moves to pick it up.

(Ah~ I've been found out...)

Seiji opens the menu and looks at it, while Kaoru unconsciously looks up at the ceiling.

"I thought so. This hasn't been changed either. --Kaoru, just what does this mean?"

Seiji's long finger taps on the price portion of the menu.

"U~mmm, what do you mean~?"

"Don't play dumb! And don't stretch out your words! These prices haven't changed in the least since I came here all those years ago, have they? It's true that in the past, the previous owner was able to create his own roasts which allowed him to lower the prices as much as possible, but you periodically stock up on new roasts, right? Which means that you'd also periodically need to raise the price for a cup of coffee. Your utilities should also be more expensive now than they were back then... --With that, why aren't those changes reflected in your menu?"

"...Eh~, even if you ask me why..."

The answer is simple; he simply doesn't want to change the prices.

He wants to keep 'Sarasa' as close to the way it was with the previous owner as possible.

The owner had wished to allow his customers to drink delicious coffee for cheap, and had done everything he could to suppress the cost of the coffee including buying coffee beans cheaply from a friend of his and creating his own roasts.

Of course, Kaoru couldn't mimic him to that extent, but he wanted to continue the owner's dream of having customers drinking delicious coffee for cheap prices as well as he could. That's why he does his best to purchase delicious coffee beans at wholesale prices. Because of that, the money for the utilities has disappeared and he was ending up paying for them out of his own salary.

(If I said that to him, he'd definitely be angry.)

The Seiji in front of him right now is listening to him with uncharacteristic seriousness.

If he confesses the truth to him, he will definitely become seriously angry.

"Um~... Because those are the building management's policy?"

Kaoru smiles at Seiji.

"...You're still playing dumb."

Usually, when he smiles at Seiji he puts the other man in a good mood, but it seems that today he's simply annoying Seiji even more.

"In that case, why don't I call the building owner?"

Without pausing, he reaches his hand across the counter and seizes the phone from its cradle. And with a couple of beeps he pulls up the phone's memory.

"Hey...! Seiji-san, do you know the building owner's name?!"

"I heard it in the past from the previous owner. I don't remember it perfectly, but if I see it I'll remember. --Oh, this is it, isn't it?"

Seiji indicates a name on the memory screen with his finger, and holds the phone at a distance where Kaoru won't be able to grab it from him.

"Ah!"

The fact that it's the correct name shows clear on his face, and Kaoru immediately regrets it.

"All right, so it really is this one."

Seiji, having confirmed the truth from Kaoru's expression, presses the connect button with a beep.

"I was lying! What I said was a lie! I'm the one who did it on purpose. It has nothing to do with the building owner!"

"You did it on purpose?"

Seiji stops the call before it can connect, and glares at him with a look that says "What do you mean?"

(...Uwaaah, that's a scary expression.)

A small wrinkle gathers between Seiji's brows as he glares at him intently.

He isn't sure if it's because of his manly features, but he finds the intensity of Seiji's angry look to be unbearable.

Kaoru finds himself retreating.

"Ah~ the truth is..."

There's no choice, he has to confess the truth.

After he finishes saying everything, Kaoru finds that as he feared Seiji's brow wrinkles have only gotten deeper.

"I'm shocked by how much of an idiot you are."

"...You're saying I'm an idiot?"

That's the first time anyone has called him that.

As Kaoru stares blankly at Seiji, he once again says "You're an idiot."

"I know that you want to continue the previous owner's dying wish, but this sort of reckless management is... You must understand that there's no way you'll be able to continue this way long term, right?"

"...Ah~ But, I've been able to manage all right so far."

"You haven't! You haven't, and that's why your living situation is so difficult right now!!! --Hey, you haven't been borrowing any money, have you?"

As Seiji waits for his answer with an amazingly scary face, Kaoru quickly shakes his head in the negative.

"All right. So you weren't that much of an idiot... Although, I have one more question that I want you to answer."

"Wh-what is it?!"

"What do you do on your days off?"

Kaoru is startled by the straight-forward question.

"It's been over half a month since I've started coming here, but you haven't taken a single day off, have you? If I remember correctly, Thursday used to be the day that the cafe was closed."

"Ah~ Um~... The truth is, in the years I've been the owner here I've pretty much never taken a day off."

Kaoru forces a false smile. If he took even a single day off his sales would decrease. That's why he can't let himself take a day off.

"I thought as much. It's amazing that your body hasn't broken down by now. ...Just what sort of punishment game are you playing?"

Seiji mutters, intermixed with a sigh as he strikes his own forehead.

"It's not that I don't understand your feelings, Kaoru, but you're still being unreasonable. With your mixed-up priorities you're going to end up bankrupting your beloved cafe."

"And besides, I really don't think your regular customers will mind all that much."

Seiji's words once again stab Kaoru in the chest.

"You need to cut it out and resign yourself to the fact that you have to raise the prices."

While holding the menu open, Seiji taps his finger strongly against the price section for emphasis.

"...But~ I'm managing things right now... And I really think if I were to raise the prices now I would need approval from the building owner. Besides, it's not like I need to do it right away... I think~"

While Kaoru tries to continue in a quiet voice... Seiji's tapping finger moves through his line of sight, going from the menu to his head, as he grumbles "Don't lengthen the end of your words." while his eyebrow twitches.

"All right. I've got it! You just need the building owner's confirmation, right? In that case, I guess I really should give her a call."

"Uwaaah! Please wait! I'll contact her myself!"

Kaoru, in his panic, sprints across the counter and snatches the phone from Seiji's hand.

"Then call her right now."

"Eh? Ah... that's~ um, there's that! Some of the regular customers will be coming in soon, and I'd like to be able to take my time when I talk to her so I'll give her a call after the cafe closes."

Even though he smiles, he really doesn't think he can do this.

Seiji raises an eyebrow and continues to urge Kaoru to call now. Kaoru eventually gives up and lifts the phone to his ear.

He wonders how long it's been since he last made this call as a voice he hasn't heard in a long time echoes through the phone with a "Hello, this is Honda speaking."

After Kaoru gives his name, the voice gently echoes through the phone with "Oh? Kaoru-chan? It's been a while. Are you doing well?"

(Aah, she hasn't changed at all.)

'Sarasa's building owner is a woman who carries her advanced age well.

She's a very kind person who takes great consideration towards others, but Kaoru admits that he has a bit of a hard time handling her.

Rather than being thankful for her kindness, he always has the urge to bow down at her feet and apologize over and over again...

"Thanks to you, I'm doing very well. How are you doing, owner?"

"I'm also doing fine."

And then... she starts talking about how lately she's picked up a new hobby.

Kaoru listens to her obediently, giving the appropriate responses when necessary, when he feels a heavy hand suddenly land on his shoulder.

He sees Seiji's scary face glaring at him from point-blank range, and he seems to be implying 'get to the real purpose of this' without using any words.

(...Jeez, he's so short-tempered.)

Although, given that this is the second time he's had to help Kaoru out because of his carefree nature, perhaps his behavior is just right?

Since Kaoru doesn't have a choice, he retreats behind the counter... and begins to explain the real problem to her.

As he explains the entire story up until now, she responds with a wry laugh "Oh my! You mean you haven't raised the prices yet?" And when he explains that he's thinking about raising the prices now she responds decidedly with "You can do whatever you want to do."

With a sigh of relief Kaoru hangs up the phone, and Seiji, who had been listening in, leans forward and says "It looks like the problem is solved." with a triumphant expression.

"...So it seems."

(This is... for the best.)

He used every trick he could to continue things the way they are, but sooner or later he probably would have hit a dead end with everything staying the same.

It wasn't like he hadn't realized that possibility before now, but he simply hadn't had any desire to change things within him.

No, even now he doesn't really want to change things...

(I suppose this is my punishment for losing the game...)

As long as he's the only one who suffers, Kaoru can endure anything.

But, if what he is doing could cause 'Sarasa' to shut down, then it wouldn't just be him but also all of the regular customers who love this shop who would be sad. Not only that, but he'd also trouble the building owner who had entrusted this shop to him out of her own kindness.

And more than anything, he would never be forgiven by the previous owner if he allowed that to happen.

He's behaving like a spoiled child. This isn't the time to be stamping his feet and throwing a tantrum over the fact that he doesn't want to change anything.

"I'm sorry. I've caused you a lot of trouble."

"Yeah. I'll take a cup of coffee as my consultation fee. But I'll have a 'Mandelic' instead of this weak stuff."

Somehow, the silent and downhearted Kaoru is able to answer Seiji's bright demeanor.

"That's quite the bargain price."

Kaoru gives his courtesy smile as he puts the tasting cup away.

Then, per Seiji's request, Kaoru puts a different blend of coffee into the coffeemaker just as the bell at the entrance rings to indicate new customers coming in.

It's the usual old couple that enters the cafe.

Today was their medical check-up day so they came to the cafe after visiting the hospital.

"Welcome. You two are early today."

"It's because we left home a little earlier than usual today."

The two of them order "the usual" in unison as they avoid sitting next to Seiji on the left side of the counter and instead take their seats at the far right of the counter.

The two of them seem to be in exceptionally good moods and their complexion is good as well.

While putting on the requested coffee, Kaoru can see the two of them smiling.

Kaoru comments "It looks like your check-up went well" while serving their coffee. Roku-san lifts his thumb while Ryuu-san puffs out his chest and replies "I suppose so."

"Our blood count has gone up."

"Heeee, so you still have some blood left after all that they've drawn out? Although, it looks to me like you're already starting to fade."

"What did you say?!"

"Such a rude youngster!"

The harmonious mood that had been there earlier changes completely, as Seiji is unable to resist meddling by starting up a verbal quarrel with them.

(A~ah, it's started again.)

It seems to have become a custom that every time Seiji and the old couple meet they start fighting.

For a while now, they've seemed to gain some sort of satisfaction from getting all riled up and they seem to enjoy every moment of their fights.

But they are able to hold regular conversations so it's not as if they can't get along.

It could be that quarreling like this is some kind of game for them.

(I wonder if that's also part of the reason that their physical condition has recently gotten so good...)

Perhaps this level of moderate excitement is enough to increase their blood circulation... and with his imagination, Kaoru starts chuckling to himself.

"I'm going out to do a little shopping~ I should be back in no more than ten minutes so could you guys please watch the shop like you usually do?"

Kaoru makes his request during a break in the endless quarreling.

There aren't any other customers, and Kaoru is running low on some of the ingredients he needs so he grabs his eco-bag and heads outside.

(Ah~ such nice weather.)

He wonders if summer is getting close, the shadows of the cars that pass by on the street have gotten darker than they were before.

Thanks to the shopping center's arcade, he enters an area of shadow and speeds up his pace as he walks down the street.

His destination is the grocery store which is about a minute away if he walks quickly.

This shopping center has a grocery store and butcher shop that has cheap prices, with an alcohol store in the very center of it.

The local residents who return home from work late at night will travel this way when they are heading home from the train station, so the shops agreed to cooperate by staying open later. When they built the bypass five years ago, a larger store started to steal their customers, but somehow they managed to stand their ground and avoided going into decline.

"Huh? If it isn't the owner of Sarasa! You're going shopping at this time of day?"

A familiar face recognizes Kaoru and calls out to him as he stands on the sidewalk in front of the grocers, lining up the produce for their special sale.

"There's been a pause in the stream of customers so I came to restock some ingredients I'm running low on."

"We're just in front of each other. If you give me a call I'd make a delivery to you."

"Nonsense. I can't let you spoil me to the point where I don't even do my own shopping. Besides, I enjoy going outside myself every now and then."

He lowers his head and thanks the grocer for his concern before entering the store.

Kaoru checks the condition of each of the produce he needs before putting them into his basket and heading to the register.

(Owner of Sarasa... huh?)

While hurrying back on the road he came by, for some reason he starts to feel rather strange.

A long time ago, when Kaoru would constantly be flying up and down this shopping center the one who was called the "owner of Sarasa" was someone else. He had just been called the "part-timer of Sarasa".

(It's already been seven years since then.)

It's almost like he is only just now able to think about that time...

Ever since the previous owner had passed away the only thing Kaoru had been dreaming of was

being able to protect Sarasa. And it had gotten to the point where he simply didn't care if he had any time to think about himself or his own needs at all.

He had matured from the college student "part-timer of Sarasa". Even his short hair from back then has already grown past his waist.

Even the contents of the store windows that enthusiastically attract customers here change from day to day...

(Perhaps the only thing that hasn't changed is myself...)

--I'm back."

The bell chimes as he opens the door to Sarasa, and here the scene of what hasn't changed is widened.

It's the exact same interior as when the previous owner had been alive...

"Welcome back."

Even the faces of the old couple sitting at the counter haven't changed since those days.

When he enters the store like this, he almost expects to see the owner standing behind the counter and saying "Thanks for your hard work" with that gentle smile he loved so much...

Kaoru is caught in that hallucination, and steps into the store filled with confusion and hope.

"Yeah, good work."

Kaoru is caught by Seiji's voice, which hadn't been there seven years ago.

In that instant it felt like someone stepped right in front of him and slapped him with their hand with a sharp crack.

--Ah, thank you."

The double exposure to memories from the past and the hazy vision that had appeared in front of him as a result immediately clear.

Kaoru finds himself bewildered as he is suddenly returned to reality and repeatedly blinks his strained eyes in response.

(That's right... I'll never be able to see the owner again.)

His field of vision grows blurry again as a profound feeling of despair wells up inside of him.

"Is something wrong with your eyes?"

"It's because it's so bright outside... My eyes are still growing accustomed to the darkness in here."

In order to get his vision back to normal, Kaoru repeatedly blinks his eyes again.

Now, Kaoru returns to his original position which is behind the counter. And as he starts putting the produce he purchased into the refrigerator, the two old men get up and announce that they are heading home for the day.

"Already? Isn't it rather early?"

"I'm feeling a bit tired so I want to stop by the hospital on the way home."

The two of them always stop off for a quick health checkup on their way home, and normally always wasted time here so that they could go straight to dinner after their checkup.

The fact that they're so tired today that they can't spend that extra time seems strange.

"Are you having a different examination than usual?"

He just wants to ask a bit more out of concern, but the two of them just say "See you tomorrow" and hurry out the door as if they're running away.

As he thinks about how strange this is, he leans against the counter to watch them leave and calls out his usual farewell after them.

Then, as he starts washing the cups they had left behind on the counter he suddenly hears "I'm sorry" as Seiji apologizes.

"For what? --Ah! Don't tell me. You said something horrible to those two and that's what drove

them out, didn't you? They are very important and longtime regular customers so please don't bully them so much."

"Are those two the type of guys who would be easily chased out by something like that?"

"Am I wrong? Then what are you apologizing for?"

"I asked the two of them for stories of the past. About you and the previous owner. ...I had no idea about the circumstances between the two of you, yet I did something so insensitive."

Seiji apologizes again and lowers his head.

"Hey... Um~ please stop that!"

With a sudden apology like that, all Kaoru could do is feel very confused.

There shouldn't have been anything negative about the previous owner that Seiji would feel the need to apologize over.

"Just what exactly did they tell you?"

"That you were the reason the previous owner got divorced... I thought that it was strange, how fixated you are on him, but in that case it makes sense. And I can also understand why you would be so hesitant about calling the building owner."

(A~ah... He's been completely fooled by them.)

It seems that Seiji has been deceived by the old couple.

That's why the two of them had run away so fast. They wanted to retreat before he discovered that they had lied to him.

"Those two can't be helped."

He wondered if they had decided to lie to Seiji during their conversation for entertainment, or were they building up material for their argument tomorrow...?

It seems that Seiji really is an excellent playmate for those two.

Kaoru smiles wryly as he wipes off his hands which had gotten wet from washing dishes.

"That's completely incorrect. --You were a regular customer here before I became a part-timer, right? The owner was already divorced by then."

"Right?" he asks.

--Ah! Now that you mention it, you're right. ...Dammit! Those old bastards!"

Seiji gets frustrated as he realizes he's been tricked.

When Kaoru had first gotten his part-time job here the previous owner, Yaguchi, had told him that it had already been eight years since he had gotten divorced.

And his ex-wife was the building owner, Honda Sae.

When he'd first opened the café, he had named the shop "Sarasa" after her using the "Sa" from his wife's name.

During that time they'd been an intimate couple, but a series of unfortunate deaths happened one after the other in the building owner's family and she inherited a great deal of wealth and property and a division formed between husband and wife.

It had only been a few years for Yaguchi since he's changed careers from being a salaryman, to fulfilling his childhood dream of running a café. He'd had to borrow money to start the café, and so he suddenly started to feel like he was financially dependent on his now-wealthy wife.

It seemed like there were also many people who thoughtlessly mentioned how nice it was that he could pursue his hobby while his wealthy wife supported him.

In this situation he couldn't enjoy running the café the way he had dreamed, and began to feel unnecessarily negative toward his wife. Before he broke out in anger at his wife, he wanted a divorce and requested it from her himself.

Since she knew that although her husband was kind he was also stubborn, she knew that she didn't have any choice but to accept the divorce...

"They didn't divorce on bad terms. It's because they still loved each other that they were able to separate amicably."

Their children were already adults at that time, and reluctantly acknowledged their parents' divorce.

Although he believed that as time wore on and they grew old together those fixations would have faded and they could have been happy again...

(Although, before that day could come the owner died...)

As he recalls the image of the family's grieving expressions at the funeral, Kaoru's chest hurts.

"Then, what about that? Is the idea that you and the previous owner were lovers also a lie?"

"It's a lie."

Kaoru forces a smile.

"It was just an unrequited love on my part."

"...You fell in love with him?"

"Yes. Very passionately."

In truth, it was love at first sight.

When he rushed into the store with his application after seeing the part-time job advertisement, Kaoru instantly fell in love the moment he laid eyes on the calmly smiling man who welcomed him.

"What was the age difference between you and the previous owner?"

"Love has nothing to do with age."

Incidentally, it had nothing to do with their lifestyles either.

Even when he realized, after falling in love at first sight, that the owner also had homosexual interests it had become such a trivial thing that he didn't really care.

“I really, really loved him... Even when I wasn’t working, I would sit in that seat at the counter with my chin in my hands and just gaze at the sight of him.”



Seiji lifts his finger, and taps it on the counter in front of him right in front of Kaoru’s eyes.

“...Here?”

“Yes.”

The counter is smooth, and has the look of a flowing current. Even though it has aged it still stands beautifully without any wearing down.

Yaguchi had been a strict person who wouldn't compromise on the flavor of his coffee, but in comparison he showed a great deal of generosity with part-timer Kaoru and the regular customers and overall was a gentle person.

He liked making other people happy more than anything. And thanks to his gentle smile he had a series of laughter lines around his mouth almost like the rings of a tree. To Kaoru, each and every one of those wrinkles were proof of Yaguchi's kindness and gentleness.

Kaoru would sit in that seat and watch the owner smile gently without tiring, and even now those memories burned inside of him.

“So, is that why you made such a strange expression when I started sitting here recently?”

The truth is... Kaoru smiles bitterly.

“So, how did the previous owner think of you?”

“What do you mean, how?”

“...Was he in love with you?”

“There's no way.”

Kaoru shrugs his shoulders.

“He would always talk about how much he liked me, but I realized his ‘like’ had a different meaning. When I thought of it as an uncomplicated feeling of affection, I was able to say ‘thank you’ back to him. It was always like that, although it might have been nice if I had misunderstood him.”

Since Kaoru is always so straight-forward with his behaviors, it wasn't long before the regular customers realized Kaoru's true feelings.

But Yaguchi never noticed.

He was younger than Yaguchi's own children, and he was a part-timer of the same sex, so Kaoru had never even dreamed that he would truly fall in love with him.

When he had first started working part-time, and for the first year after, Kaoru had misunderstood that.

But after that first year passed, Yaguchi would make a slightly troubled expression whenever he told him he loved him.

“I wonder if that was when he noticed that it wasn’t an uncomplicated feeling of affection? He was a kind person, so that must have seriously troubled him...”

Yaguchi’s wonderful smile changed a little, and the space between them increased.

When the regular customers first noticed the change was when the owner started talking about wanted a change of atmosphere and started to talk about going to India.

And after that was when Yaguchi never again returned to the café.

“—It’s almost as if I killed him.”

When he noticed the fact that Yaguchi’s expression became troubled he should have given up on his love and quit his part-time job.

Even though he’d received the indirect suggestion that Yaguchi didn’t know how to respond to his feelings, he still innocently continued to tell the previous owner that he ‘loved’ him.

He was fine with it being an unrequited love.

But he hadn’t wished for what he got in exchange.

He just wanted to stay by his side, and to love him...

He only considered his own love, and without thinking of the other person’s feelings he continued to spout off his feelings of love.

Since the previous owner couldn’t accept Kaoru’s feelings he had felt cornered, and had left on a journey to escape them.

And then he got into an accident.

“...It wasn’t your fault, Kaoru. The accident was just bad luck.

“No, it was my fault.”

Kaoru is able to smile with dry eyes.

“If I hadn’t been here, then he wouldn’t have wanted to travel during that time. If he hadn’t gone traveling, then he’d still be alive right now.”

When Kaoru had first heard about his death, at first his own selfish heart was in pain.

He had a mountain of regrets, and had cried without caring about his own appearance...

But, just like his love, the regrets were completely one-sided.

No matter how much it hurt, the owner would never return.

No matter how many tears he cried, unless the man he wanted to apologize to reappeared, the tears would just be tears of self-pity.

It made Kaoru realize that there were some mistakes that you could never take back.

He no longer has the right to cry...

“After the funeral, when the building owner said she was going to close the café... I wasn’t able to contain myself and asked her to entrust it to me.”

He hadn’t wanted Yaguchi to lose his dream café ‘Sarasa’.

‘Sarasa’ is the proof that Yaguchi lived.

Protecting this shop which he had laboriously and steadily created with its wonderful atmosphere and many regular customers serves as Kaoru’s atonement.

The building owner had dismissed him, saying that he didn’t need to go so far, but Kaoru hadn’t given up.

He’d gone to her home countless times to make his request, that he couldn’t balance both college and ‘Sarasa’. So, before he’d even gotten approval, he dropped out of college so that he would be able to run the café by himself.

When the building owner learned that she sighed and said it couldn't be helped before turning it over to him.

Although it's good he was saved by that... he mutters...

“Did you drop out of college?”

When he hears the shocked voice Kaoru forces a smile and nods.

“At that time I stopped caring about anything else...”

“You really are an idiot.”

Seiji speaks with shock again.

(He called me an idiot again.)

Because Kaoru had never intended to choose any other path than this one, Kaoru feels a bit of reluctance.

“It seems like you may have truly been earnest when you dropped out of college... So, how long do you plan on continuing?”

“Continuing... what?”

“I’m asking you how long you plan on continuing to run this café.”

“I plan on running it forever, of course...”

“But you weren’t planning on running a café in the first place, right? You’re only here because you’re atoning for what happened to the previous owner. So, how long will that continue for? Are you planning on living your entire life bound by that?”

The words stick in Kaoru’s chest with a thud.

(...That hurts.)

It’s been this way since they first met.

It's strange, but Seiji's words manage to get to Kaoru's very core.

Besides, the words are correct so the pain is unnecessary.

"I'm not telling you to quit."

Seiji speaks to Kaoru, who hung his head in response to the pain in his chest.

"I've also taken an interest in this shop. And the old men will be lonely if the place they like to spend their time disappears. I believe it can continue as it is. It's just... there are some things that we need to stop for it to continue. As long as you're restrained by your regrets, you can't live your own life."

"My own life? I took the owner's life from him so why should I have a life of my own...?"

"Is that why you're going to live the rest of your life fulfilling the previous owner's dream? I don't think he would have wanted that, considering how kind a person he was."

Kaoru is struck again.

That might actually be true.

Yaguchi had always loved seeing the faces of customers enjoying the coffee he made far more than actually hearing people praise the taste.

A man as kind as him would not be happy having Kaoru dedicate his entire life to atonement.

(...It's been... seven years.)

It has been that long that Kaoru has been standing behind the counter of this café all by himself.

Compared to the time he'd spent with Yaguchi, how many times that had he spent here alone?

Is it that seven years have already passed, or is it that it's only been seven years since...?

If Yaguchi hadn't gone on that trip and were still alive here, he might have returned to the building owner by now.

Surrounded by his children and wife, he might have been able to have a happy life.

And Kaoru had destroyed that happy reason for nothing more than a childish love.

(Can I stop...?)

How will he be able to do something like that?

The heavy weight of his remorse for destroying the life of the person he loved keeps him frozen...

Since he couldn't answer, all Kaoru can do is lower his head.

The café is filled with an uncomfortable silence.

At that moment there is the chime of the bell as the door opens.

Kaoru is shocked but calls out "Welcome~!" even as he flinches.

"Owner! I brought then express delivery of the items you ordered!"

The person who carries the boxes to the counter as if they are incredibly light is the son and heir of the coffee bean shop, Tooru.

"Ah... Tooru-kun, that was fast. You can leave the delivery anywhere..."

"I wanted to come during your downtime here at 'Sarasa'. I was hoping for a cup of your delicious coffee. I think I'll have a mocha today. Huh? The old men aren't here today. That's a relief since that means they can't give me a scolding today... Ah, here's the additional Mandarin you ordered. It's rare for you to use anything other than your regular one. Did your number of regular customers that drink the same coffee over and over again increase?"

Even though the mood in the café is delicate, Tooru doesn't seem to notice and continues talking cheerfully on his own.

"That's right. They drink like idiots."

Seiji says with a good amount of vigor and a wry smile.

“Huh? It seems like you have a customer. What do you think of our beans? Do they suit your taste?”

Tooru sits in the only free seat next to Seiji.

“I like them quite a bit.”

“Right, right? Ah, but it’s also thanks to the owner’s skills too. I’m already addicted to the coffee that the owner makes. Being able to look at his beautiful face while drinking his delicious coffee is the absolute best.”

He looks to a troubled Kaoru for agreement, but he just smiles back without a word.

“Hah~ you’re really lovely today, too.”

Tooru gazes at him looking happily spellbound.

Remarkably, the number of words he speaks decreases as he smiles while gazing at Kaoru and turns the conversation to the sample of coffee beans and then after slowly finishing his single cup of coffee he obediently returns to his own store.

As if to replace Tooru, a number of regular customers and Kaoru becomes very busy.

When he finally is able to take a break at the counter

“Aren’t you giving out your courtesy smile a bit too freely?”

Seiji says and looks like he’s pouting.

“That’s not true. The previous owner was always like this too...”

Having a smile is the basis of serving customers, which is why Kaoru smiles.

Kaoru had learned how to smile courteously soon after becoming the owner himself.

That had been shortly after Yaguchi had died and Kaoru’s heart had been all messed up so he hadn’t been able to truly smile, so he’d practiced in front of a mirror to try to get close to Yaguchi’s smile.

“The problem is that your smile is too beautiful.”

“I don’t think it’s beautiful.”

“Look in a mirror.”

“I have looked. I think you think too highly of me. In my opinion, you’re far more beautiful than I am, Seiji-san.”

Although, rather than beautiful, he should probably call him intense.

Anyway, just having him nearby made him stand out as he exuded this air of aggressiveness.

If he said that honestly, he wonders if Seiji would feel shy or would deny it firmly.

“...I’m not really praising you.”

“Come on. I don’t have a secret motive. –Ah, but I’m sure a number of the regular customers are fans of your novels. I hear them complaining about the fact that you haven’t published anything in a while, but would you tell me what you’re planning on working on from now on?”

Even though they’re fans of his novels, they don’t know what he looks like and none of them have realized that Seiji is camped out at the counter of the café.

Since even though people could be discreet, if it was discovered that ‘Andou Seiji’ was a regular customer here there would be too much commotion, Kaoru kept it secret.

He also felt that would be easier on Seiji...

“Plans for a new novel...?”

Seiji’s eyebrows furrow a bit.

(Ah, it looks like it’s no good.)

Since all he’d been doing lately was surfing the net, he thought that maybe he was working on inspiration for his next work.

“Didn’t you recently say you were currently working on it?”

Kaoru thought that maybe he was just stalling but then Seiji says “I did say that currently, but...” with a pained smile.

“It probably isn’t really recently anymore but... I should be able to start it soon.”

“In that case, can’t you simply ask them to wait a little longer?”

“I suppose so. –By the way, has that idiot from before shown his face since?”

He’s definitely asking about Sakata, the man who attacked him.

Kaoru shakes his head.

“No, he hasn’t come. He’s probably given up by now.”

(Has he always been worried about that...?)

He’s happy to have him worry about him.

At the same time, the feeling of responsibility that hits him every now and then when he’s in that spot hits him and he wonders if he drove him away from this shop, and he feels a little guilty.

“If the reason you keep coming to the café is to be my bodyguard then you don’t have to worry anymore... Don’t bother with that and focus on your work.”

If he genuinely is starting his new novel soon then it would probably be better if he wasn’t in a place where people are constantly coming and going.

Although, given how he’s become completely used to seeing Seiji sitting at the counter seat he’d probably get a little lonely...

Kaoru drops his eyes.

“Don’t worry about dumb things like that. That’s not why I asked that.”

Seiji seems disappointed.

“I’m just confirming the facts.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. I don’t choose the locations I work. Besides, I originally wrote my debut novel here.”

“That’s right, you told me before that you used to bring your papers to the furthest table inside the café.”

“I was just a poor student who could only afford one cup of coffee a day. I would have had more money if I’d gotten a part-time job, but back then I felt that my time was too valuable and sometimes I wouldn’t even eat so I could write more of my novel.”

Smelling the scent of the coffee that had become ingrained in the very wood of the shop might have a calming effect on him, and Seiji looks nostalgic as he glances over at the furthest table.

“It might have just been a service, but every now and then the previous owner would give me toast with my coffee too.”

“That sounds like him...”

Yaguchi liked serving customers. No, he just liked people in general.

He cared deeply for all of the people who came into this tiny café.

“I’m doing my best to become like him, but it’s pretty difficult.”

“You’re saying stupid things again...”

Seiji looks amazed as he returns his gaze to Kaoru.

“I said something stupid?”

“You did. You say that with your youth, but he had 50+ years to calm and become so gentle. The previous owner was overflowing with kindness and even if it was just a courtesy smile you felt it. If I say it plainly, it backfires with you. The previous owner’s smile felt calm, your smile is exciting.”

“Are you saying I’m caffeine?”

That's a terrible thing to say.

"It's the truth. That's why stupid guys like the one from before show up here."

"That's terrible. Even if you tell me that, I have to smile at people since they're my customers, right?"

"You just need to stop smiling with that strange smile."

"Strange..."

He's saying terrible things again.

"You make it sound as if I'm seducing them..."

"Well, someone obviously interpreted it that way at the beginning."

"Do I look strange to you now?"

"Let's see. If you're constantly smiling so you can be more like the previous owner, then that's why you're trying to mimic his appearance and smile at the customers like you care about them, right? That's why it comes across as exciting... well, they interpret it as flattering. But because I've heard you talk about the previous owner I feel like I can see your regrets showing through in that courtesy smile."

The pain from those words pierces him in the chest and makes it hard for him to breathe.

"I said this before, but I think it's best for you to take a break somewhere else. Although, I may just be feeling responsible since someone once told me that too..."

Seiji abruptly furrowed his eyebrows, looking rather young, and his voice falls to a murmur as if he's talking to himself.

"What do you mean?"

He asks, noticing Seiji's sudden change in behavior but he responds bluntly with "It's personal".

"First off, we're talking about you. I understand the fact that you want to keep this shop just the

same as it was when the previous owner was here. But, you know, even if you stay frozen everything around you will continue to change.”

At some point Seiji’s long finger had started tapping on the counter.

It seems that Seiji is seriously thinking about Kaoru.

“You won’t be praised for sacrificing yourself if you’re only doing it because of your feelings of guilt. This whole time you’ve been stupidly acting like this situation is good and that there really are people who don’t change. You might speak in such a clichéd manner, but you need to treasure yourself too.”

“There’s no point in treasuring myself when I have no worth.”

Kaoru shrugs his shoulders and smiles with dry eyes.

The last time he acted selfishly, he destroyed the life of the person who was most important to him.

He simply couldn’t forgive himself for that.

“...You idiot. That kid who was here earlier would cry if he heard that.”

“Kid?”

“Didn’t he say his name was Tooru? From the bean store.”

“Aah, that kid...”

“He seriously admires you. The way he looked at you showed that he really treasures you. I don’t know what he’d think if he knew the target of that adoration wanted to throw himself away in the mud...”

“...It’s not like he’s stuck to me.”

“It was just an example. Don’t make fun of me!”

“Ye~s.”

“A grown man shouldn’t lengthen his responses like that!”

“Yes!”

“Jeez. This is exactly like what happened in the past...”

Tap, tap... Seiji’s finger continues to drum against the counter.

(He’s thinking about me so seriously, yet I...)

He hated the fact that he couldn’t listen to Seiji’s advice obediently.

Actually, it seems he’s starting to hate himself even more now than he did before.

“It’s not just that kid. I also...”

Seiji murmurs softly while staring at his long finger tapping the counter.

(‘I also’?)

What was he going to say?

Wanting to hear the continuation of those cut off words, Kaoru listens more intently.

But Seiji doesn’t say another word.

“Ah...”

Wanting to hear what Seiji had been about to say no matter what, Kaoru starts to continue the conversation on his end.

But a customer’s request of “Another coffee please, owner!” interrupts them.

“Thank you very much--!”

Even after settling the bills and bowing to the regular customers as they went home, Kaoru’s feelings kept turning to Seiji.

No matter what, he is bothered by what Seiji might have said earlier.

But he missed his chance to hear it, and is hesitant to ask Seiji now what he was going to say.

Seiji continues tapping the counter with his finger after that... and doesn't say another word.

He doesn't say anything more before finally heading home.

(I don't know why, but it's a little lonely...)

He could have at least said 'see you later' before he left...

Having Seiji not talk to him is really lonely.

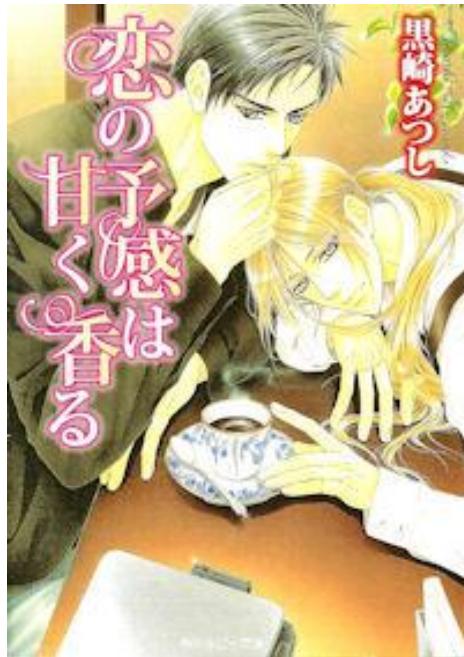
It certainly has been a long time since he's wanted to hear a particular person's voice.

After Seiji left, Kaoru continues looking towards the door for a long time.

Koi no Yukan wa Amaku Kaoru

The Sweet Smell of a Love Premonition

By Kurosaki Atsushi



Chapter 3

A café where most of the customers are regular customers cannot raise its prices suddenly.

For that reason, he wrote his intention to raise the prices next month into the menu, and would be observing the regular customers' reactions to it.

Most of the regular customers seem to accept it easily.

There are also some customers who came from other cafes who seem worried because of the established low prices that if the prices don't increase they wouldn't be able to compete with the chain cafes.

And just like that, the reactions that Kaoru hears are all favorable.

Thanks to that, Kaoru is able to take the plunge and raise the prices as planned.

But he still feels like he should apologize for doing so, so he listens to the suggestion of his self-appointed business consultant, Seiji, and creates a point card system.

If they collect a certain number of stamps, then they get a free coffee or snack from the menu.

The reactions to that are also very positive.

And he makes sure to give his business consultant plenty of coupons for free items as well.

“It isn’t stopping.”

“It seems so. If it keeps raining nonstop like this I’ll get depressed.”

The old couple sighs between themselves as they sit with their backs to the counter so they can gaze at the scenery outside through the window.

“It can’t be helped. It’s the rainy season, after all.”

Kaoru looks out the window, which is darker than usual, with them.

(Seiji-san is late today.)

There are several different times Seiji comes to the cafe.

There are times when he comes first thing in the morning, and other times when he comes after noon.

It’s now three o’clock.

He’s never been this late before.

Perhaps he doesn’t feel like going out today because of the rain?

Or maybe he’s enthusiastically doing his work?

Previously, Seiji would be constantly scrolling through the internet on his computer but recently he’s constantly had word processor open.

And along with that, Seiji has been talking less and less recently.

After his customary argument with the old couple, Seiji would stop talking at all and just stare at his computer.

Even so, it never felt quiet.

There was the continuous sound of him pressing the keys, and then there was the constant tapping sound that reverberated through the café as a result of his habit of tapping the counter with his finger when seriously thinking about something.

(It would be nice if he would contact me to let me know he wouldn't be coming...)

Of course, Seiji had no duty or responsibility to contact him.

He knew that, of course, but then why did he still feel like he wanted to complain?

As he lets out a sigh, the bell rings to signal a customer coming in.

The person who opens the door and enters the café is a young man in a trim suit that Kaoru has never seen before.

The young man has a refined and well-put together look as well. It seems he's just come from the arcade, and he neatly folds up his umbrella and places it in the umbrella stand before looking to Kaoru and smiling.

“Welcome.”

The regular customers are fine finding a seat on their own and sitting down, but first time customers don't usually do that.

Kaoru moves out from behind the counter to show the customer to one of the seats at a table, but he heads toward the counter meeting Kaoru halfway.

“Good afternoon. You are Kaoru-san... correct?”

“Yes, that's correct.”

“I'm Mitsuya of Sagawa Publishing, it's nice to meet you.”

The young man came up to the counter, and in a smooth motion that indicated he was accustomed to doing so, he handed over his business card to Kaoru.

“You’re Mitsuya-san?”

It seems this man isn’t a normal customer.

Since Kaoru doesn’t understand the situation, he turns his attention from the business card which has Mitsuya Kyou written on it, and looks back at the young man.

“Yes. I’m the editor in charge of Andou Seiji-sensei.”

“Ah, you’re Seiji-san’s...”

T/N: The editor uses the penname spelling of Seiji’s name while Kaoru uses the real spelling

“Yes. I’d like to thank you for always taking care of Andou-sensei... That’s why I came here today to thank you.”

“No, thanks are unnecessary. Ah, please have a seat.”

Kaoru offers Mitsuya a seat at the counter.

“Do you like coffee?”

“Yes. Andou-sensei told me that the coffee here is very delicious, and the truth is I came here to enjoy that as well.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll be happy to serve you. What would you like?”

“I’m so happy. In that case, I’ll have a Blue Mountain coffee.”

“All right.”

Since Seiji had promoted his coffee by saying it was delicious, he had to make sure to make it delicious...

He nervously makes the coffee, while the old couple watches Mitsuya with interest. “He said he’s in charge of him.” “He really did become a novelist.” They whisper between each other.

Since Kaoru can hear them, of course Mitsuya who's sitting next to them can hear them as well.

“Andou-sensei also mentioned that there were these old men who also look after him.”

Mitsuya tactfully says to the old couple while smiling.

“We do look after him.”

“That's right. We do, we do.”

The couple seems proud as Mitsuya pulls a number of cards out of his bag and personally hands them to them.

“I'm not sure if these will do for thanks, but please take them.”

“What are they?”

“They're book cards. They're promotional items, although I'm sorry that the names of the magazines are already written on them.”

The old couple stare curiously at the cards which have pictures of idols printed on them, and when they hear the explanation they seem happy.

The two of them talk excitedly about whether to use them themselves or give them to their grandchildren.

“These are for you too.”

“Me too?”

“Yes. I really am grateful to everyone here.”

“Grateful, you say... I think I'm the one who's been causing the trouble for him.”

“It's nothing like that. For more than two years, since Andou-sensei was away from here he was in a slump and honestly wasn't doing any work at all.”

“More than two years?”

Kaoru is rather surprised by this.

He'd heard from some of the regular customers that Seiji hadn't released anything new in quite a while, but he had no idea it had been that long.

“Yes, more than two years. Ever since he started coming here again he's been slowly getting more and more motivated to work... That's why I'm truly grateful to you, Kaoru-san.”

“There are times where people just come out of their slumps, couldn't the timing of him coming here just happen to fall at the same time as him getting out of his slump? I don't think I've been of much help.”

If anything had been helpful to Seiji, it wouldn't have been Kaoru but rather the atmosphere of the café ‘Sarasa’ itself.

Surely it was the atmosphere of the café where Seiji wrote his debut novel that inspired his creative urges again...

“Please don't say that and just accept this.”

“Really...? Then, thank you.”

It would be rude of Kaoru to refuse any further, and while still feeling lost he accepts the card.

He then places the cup of coffee he brewed on the counter with a “Here you go” to which Mitsuya politely bows his head and says “Thank you very much” in response.

“It's long past the time when Seiji-san usually comes here. It seems he's a little late today.”

Kaoru tilts his head slightly so he can look out the window.

Mitsuya, who had picked up the cup and was enjoying the aroma of the coffee, looks at Kaoru and smiles.

“Andou-sensei won't be coming today.”

“Eh? Is that really so?”

“Yes. If he knew I was coming he would have arrogantly demanded that I come during a time when he’d be here, that’s why I made sure to choose a day when I knew he couldn’t be here.”

(Arrogantly...?)

He seems to say many unusual things.

“Does Seiji-san have some sort of business today?”

“Ah, could it be you weren’t aware?”

“That’s good,” Mitsuya says as the corners of his mouth lift.

“Hey, Kaoru-san. That’s a television set behind you, isn’t it? Can you turn it on?”

Mitsuya points toward a small LCD TV.

The old small TV that they’d had in the café broke, but a regular customer who moved recently had turned this one over to him.

But it was usually only turned on when the old couple want to watch the news, so for the most part it’s just an ornament.

“It should be all right for the time being, but...”

The screen brightens and what looks like a variety talk show is projected.

“That’s good. It’s all right.”

“The channel is the right one. –Ah, look, we turned it on at just the right time.”

Mitsuya leans his body forward as he points at the screen.

“Eh?”

Intrigued, Kaoru stares at the screen wondering what is going to come on.

“...Eh? Huh... is that Seiji-san?”

“Yes, that’s Andou-sensei. It’s only every now and then, but sometimes he is asked to be a commentator on talk shows and news programs.”

The Seiji that is project on the screen is not wearing his usual rough clothing, but instead is wearing a glossy stylish suit and thin blue glasses.

His short hair is smoothed down cleanly, and he’s wearing a thoughtful smile which gives him an air of a smart, urban author.

Seiji, while being prompted by the moderator, began discussing his study on how young people nowadays respond to indiscriminate murderers.

Compared to the past, this generation is raised socially without learning courtesy or getting to experience any sort of frustration or setbacks leaving their spirit frail. With parents and children becoming friends, the strong father-figure is dying out and finally will see a deterioration in relationship between parent and child. As a result you can see the strain in the mental state of young people nowadays and it could be said that it’s impeding on their development, couldn’t it?

Without understanding the result of their own journey, and in order to escape any accompanying pain, they act on impulse...

“That quick temper is regrettable. The violence is a self-fulfilling prophecy that may lead to destruction and extinction. It’s true that we need to protect young people from being injured. However, if we’re just focused on protecting them how will they learn to cope with pain? We need to give them the opportunity to learn how to heal.”

Seiji speaks in a calm tone with his hands clasped on the table in front of him. He really does seem like a knowledgeable writer.

(Wow~! He seems like a completely different person!)

It’s hard to believe this is the same person as the one who gleefully rolls up his sleeve and says ‘leave it to me!’

It’s too different from his usual self, and Kaoru is caught up in his surprise as he stares dumbfounded at the television screen.

But then, for a moment he faintly sees one of Seiji’s fingers which is resting on the table twitch

and lets out a laugh.

(I bet he's trying really hard not to tap his finger on the table.)

It's always been Seiji's habit to tap his finger on the counter when he's deep in thought.

When Kaoru had carelessly asked if he was thinking seriously about something he hadn't seemed to notice, and it also expresses his irritation when he becomes impatient with Ryuu-san and the others.

It seems he's gotten complaints about his tapping before.

It would be bad for him to display such a strange habit on television. A poor habit like tapping your finger doesn't suit the wise urban author.



Certainly he knows that, and that's why he's doing his best to keep his finger from moving.

“He's overdoing it...”

Kaoru says with a laugh, finding the twitching of his finger amusing.

The old couple looks shocked when they see Kaoru like this.

“It's been a while...”

“That's right. It's been a while since we've seen him laugh like that.”

It's a good thing, and their wrinkled eyes narrow as they watch.

“Andou-sensei doesn’t have that feel to him when he’s here, does he?”

Kaoru nods in response to Mitsuya’s question, wiping away tears that had sprung up from laughing too hard.

“That’s true. He isn’t so pretentious when he’s here, nor does he use such difficult vocabulary... plus he’s quick to get into a fight. –Ah, but I just mean verbal fights, not physical ones.”

“I know. That’s the character he puts on whenever he’s doing a public presentation. He even uses a stylist to present that image.”

“Oh~ he goes that far to appear on TV?”

Ryuu-san stares fixedly at the TV.

“He didn’t want to do it himself. I’m the one who forced him to.”

“You did?”

He thinks about how stubborn Seiji is.

It’s amazing he was able to do something like that.

“What did you say to get him to listen?”

“Do you know his weakness?”

The old couple is very interested, probably thinking that they could use something like that as a trump card during their verbal arguments.

“I haven’t grasped any weakness of his.”

The old couple peers closely at Mitsuya’s face, causing him to draw back a little.

“It’s because of the fact that for more than two years, Andou-sensei was in a slump and wasn’t doing any work as a novelist. So I gave him a little push by telling him that he should do a little

different work if he couldn't write so that his readers wouldn't forget his name.”

“Is he really someone who's that forgettable?”

“I heard that he's quite the popular novelist.”

“Yes. He's a popular novel because he kept pushing out so many works.”

Mitsuya smiles at the old couple since they seem worried.

“But such popularity isn't going to last forever, that's why he was getting anxious over the fact that he hadn't written anything new. He was just secluding himself in his own home and becoming pessimistic about his ability to write. As he unnecessarily became more depressed, even if he were to try to write he wouldn't be able to. So, rather than having him be fixated on a novel I suggested that he change his focus on try appearing on TV.”

“Is that so?”

(He's a good person.)

If an author like Seiji doesn't write any new books then the publisher doesn't make any profit.

To think that an editor would encourage him to take a break, rather than pestering him constantly to write and practically having his hand at his throat...

Kaoru finds this very admirable.

“He's unexpectedly a timid person.”

“That's true. Being a famous author is something that he hasn't prepared for.”

Meanwhile, the old couple seems to be elated for no reason.

“It hasn't yet been ten years since Andou-sensei made his debut. He's a popular author, but he doesn't have enough experience to be considered famous. He still has a long way to go for that. Can I ask you to watch over him, and not abandon him? Andou-sensei is truly happy to be engage in such lively conversations with you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. He was in a similar situation when he wrote his debut novel, although he’d say the only thing he remembers about those days is being hungry...”

Mitsuya continues to thank the old couple for taking care of Andou-sensei while bowing his head.

The old couple seems to be in a good mood and not at all dissatisfied with this.

(...I wonder if I can also help him like that.)

The one who had preserved the ‘Sarasa’ that had inspired Seiji to write his debut novel was Kaoru.

Even if that had been the result of feelings of guilt, the fact that in the end that had been able to help someone else made him happy.

And the idea that it could continue to do so also made him happy.

That night, after Kaoru closes up the shop he takes the book card he just received in hand and heads to the shopping district’s bookstore which is still open late at night.

When he arrives he asks an employee of the shop for help in locating the paperback edition of the author Andou Seiji’s debut novel.

T/N: Once again, Seiji’s name is written using the penname kanji

Then, as he heads to the register he sees the same name on one of the weekly magazines lined up by the register and requests to buy it as well.

Once back in the small room inside of the café, Kaoru starts by looking through the magazine.

(A clandestine date...?)

There is an article with the title “Bestselling author and upcoming actress on a clandestine date” the he slips into.

With it there is a picture of Seiji dressed in the glossy stylish clothes similar to what he’d worn on the TV walking through a hotel lobby with a young woman with long hair.

There are also secret photos of the silhouettes of two people kissing and two people walking with their arms around each other on a dark sidewalk taken from behind.

According to what is written in the article, they had dinner together, after which they shared a passionate kiss while inside of the taxi, and then proceeded to spend a hot night together in a hotel.

(This can't be true.)

The date and time it took place is also written in the article, but that was a day when Seiji had stayed at 'Sarasa' until it was time to close.

There's no way that he could be drinking coffee and working on his book in front of Kaoru, while also drinking wine with a beautiful actress at a French restaurant.

(It's fake.)

This is pretty normal for mass communication, and Kaoru lets out a sarcastic laugh.

The article also writes about Seiji's past love affairs.

When the movie of his debut novel was released, he got into a relationship with the lead actress. And when his second book was turned into a television drama he had an affair with the singer who performed the theme song. And so on...

(Well, he is popular... No matter what they say, he is a best-selling author.)

While filming the TV movie his smile was conceited, as if he knew that by being a well-known author he could get any woman he wanted.

Kaoru can't help but think that he must have been dressed and acting like he had on the TV when he was rumored to be having affairs with all of those women.

Or could it be that just like when he is at 'Sarasa', he would issue orders without listening to anyone and show his short temper.

(I'm sure no woman would accept that.)

But Kaoru prefers the usual Seiji.

The immature Seiji who would argue with the old couple as much as they wanted.

He might have a short temper and be quick to shout, but at the same time he's a genuinely kind person.

Even dense Kaoru understood that the only reason Seiji gets angry and issues orders without listening to others was because he is genuinely worried about them.

Tap, tap... that long finger that would regularly tap on the counter while Seiji was trying to seriously teach him about something...

Kaoru finishes reading the article in the weekly magazine, and picks up the paperback.

The belt wrapped around the book labels it as Suspense-Action.

T/N: Japanese books often come with a strip of paper wrapped around the outer cover that can act as a label, or promotion for the author or similar titles.

(It's been a while since I've read anything.)

Even though he'd still picked up books that had been turned into movies or other talked-about titles, in recent years he hadn't had the time to actually read them.

Even though he'd planned on using his limited free time to do a bit of reading, he finds that once he starts reading, he can't stop.

The protagonist is a twenty-year-old college student. By chance he ends up discovering a national-level military secret, and gets caught up in the conflict.

The protagonist could still be called a youth with his excessive innocence but he learns confidence, betrayal, and love during the conflict... giving the novel a young adult book feel with a high entertainment value.

The military secret gave the setting a science-fiction type feel to it, but because from the eyes of the protagonist who is just a regular person the secret military organization seems very suspicious, he's able to accept it without trouble.

The government's secret plot wasn't overdone, the organization of the self-defense force, and the vast knowledge of the weapons they use were enough to satisfy his thirst for knowledge.

He felt his heart race when the protagonist was in a pinch, he twists as the mysteries slowly begin to surface, and feels his heart throb over the protagonist's new-found love, and he feels truly happy as the protagonist struggles through all of their clever schemes.

It's almost like being on a roller coaster as it moves from one situation to the next and his hand can't stop flipping through the pages.

Well, I hope you enjoyed it! Seiji's follow-up enthusiastically reads.

(So, this was his debut novel...)

His writing ability lets his readers comprehend such a complicated setting with simply psychological descriptions.

Surely Seiji poured all of his passion and abilities from that time into this book.

When he thinks of it that way, Kaoru can't help but think of each word and letter as something precious.

When he first started the story he was driven by a passionate desire to know the story, it felt like he simply raced through the string of characters as he flew through the book.

As he finishes reading the last part of the book, he can see a faint light on the horizon through the window.

(...That was good.)

It didn't have a perfectly happy ending, but it also wasn't a completely bad ending either.

Without the sweet cut off, it feels like there are still things to be done in the story. It probably ended that way because they planned on selling a sequel to this book in the future.

Perhaps because when the book was released, Seiji's name was still new, this book had fewer printed copies than normal for a first book in a series...

But lots of people talked about how good it was, and half a year after it was published he was

introduced in a gossip magazine and instantly got his big break. After that, the movie was developed along with all sorts of other forms of media creating a big boom for his writing.

But Kaoru has no memory of that.

When this novel had its first publication announced was right around the time that Kaoru started working part-time at ‘Sarasa’ which was when he had been living in a dream of love.

And the movie was released immediately after the previous owner died.

Closed off in the unchanging world of ‘Sarasa’, he didn’t have the time to pay attention to what was popular in the rest of the world.

In the commentary, it’s written that after that Seiji released novel after novel following that until he became a popular author with an established reputation.

(During that entire time, I was always here.)

They were both in the same current of time, but they had been so completely different.

Seiji had been releasing interesting books one after the other, while Kaoru had been absorbed in preserving ‘Sarasa’.

He hadn’t intended for seven years to pass without anything happening.

Yet, without any money or anything else to show for it, Kaoru had to admit it was a little lonely.

(That’s not true… Seiji hasn’t done anything these past two years either.)

It’s true that he loves writing novels, but after exuding so many novels one right after the other and then not writing anything for two years left him with a strange feeling.

(I’m sure it was painful for him.)

For someone who loves writing books so much to be unable to write…

Why did he stop being able to write? Would Seiji be angry if he asked him directly?

(For now I should read all of the rest of Seiji’s published books.)

And he still has some of the book cards he received left.

If he can read them in the order they were published, perhaps he will be able to see a bit of the path Seiji's heart has taken.

Kaoru absentmindedly strokes the cover of the book he just finished reading with his fingers as he thinks about these things.